# Editorial: Negotiated order in organisations revisited and straightened out

## Negotiated order: an ever obscure concept

This article treats the concept of negotiated order, which is made well known particularly by the book *Negotiations* by Anselm Strauss from 1978. The concept of negotiated order has been used in a considerable amount of social research. Clarke (2021) mentions that as of the summer of 2020 (27 June), Google Scholar listed about 9,400 entries with "negotiated order" in the title and/or text. By the spring of 2023 (29 April), the number of entries had risen to about 12,500. Despite the use, it seems that the notion of negotiated order itself is very non-specific. In the absence of proper definitions, writers apply it in an intuitive, and sometimes inaccurate, fashion.

According to Strauss (1978, p. 2), "negotiation ... generally ... stand[s] for one of the possible means of 'getting things accomplished' [1] when parties need to deal with each other to get those things done." These parties can be "individuals or groups or organizations of any size," and "when [they] work together" "agreement is required about such matters as what, how, when, where, and how much" (Strauss, 1978, p. ix). The products of negotiations are "contracts, understandings, agreements, 'rules,' and so forth," and also "policies" and "pacts" (Strauss, 1978, pp. 5–6).

Strauss (1978, p. 1) gives the following synonyms for negotiations: "bargaining, wheeling and dealing, compromising, making deals, reaching agreements after disagreement, making arrangements, getting tacit understandings, mediating, power brokering, trading off, exchanging, and engaging in collusion" [2]. Bargaining, making deals, trading off and exchanging all represent (social) trade. Wheeling and dealing and even engaging in collusion have a connotation of dishonesty and secrecy. Getting tacit understandings means learning about rights, duties and processes by observation or by "reading between the lines." Making arrangements can refer to almost anything. Mediating and power brokering basically mean arranging other peoples' social rights and duties. Compromising means finding a solution via making concessions. This list is so random and scattered that it appears impossible to try to find categorisations that would reveal the essential features of "negotiating."

What does the term "order" mean in the negotiation context? By *order,* Strauss refers to the "larger lineaments of groups, organizations, nations, societies, and international orders that yield the structural conditions under which negotiations of particular kinds are or are not initiated by or forced on actors" (Strauss, 1978, p. 12). This is going (somewhat) in circles because Strauss defines his "order" by using the term "order" once again in the definition. The term order has, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, dozens of different meanings. Strauss's "lineaments" that "yield structural conditions" do not help much in comprehending the idea. We will be making the following decision: we only study goal-related formal organisations, and by the term "order" we mean the rules that govern the process of the organisation, and the roles and tasks and rights and duties that the organisational actors

have [3]. The order here is a dynamic social system of norms and practices that tells how to interact in an organised, often geographically restricted operation, which actors can and should act and what they are allowed to do in the process. The order does not refer to the actual goals or output of the organisation, but the order is about the structuration of the organisational interaction. With this definition of "order" we may study the negotiated orders of schools, factories, hospitals, municipalities and so on.

Negotiations for order are needed, when some kind of a conflict, disagreement or ambiguity prevails on the proper way of fulfilling organisational tasks or roles (see Bishop and Waring, 2016, p. 1940; Johannessen, 2019, p. 517; Strauss, 1978, p. 11). Negotiations, as they are seen in the article, may be both explicit and implicit. When they are explicit, the negotiating parties openly (verbally) communicate to each other, what kind of an order prevails or is preferable. When they are more or less implicit, the communication takes place in and by action, or *subtle gestures*, as Strauss (1978, p. 225) puts it. The negotiating parties observe the formal rules and the different actors' speech and deeds, and from these they deduce what the "real" order is, and the actors in their interaction with others give clues as to what kind of rules are in force. The order here concerns both the actors' roles and the processual conducting of the organisational process.

As implied, there are alternatives to negotiating. In Strauss's book from 1978, a condensed list of such alternatives includes "persuading, educating, manipulating, appealing to the rules or to the authority, and coercion" [2] (p. x). In 1993 (p. 88) "[s]trategies include (JK: besides negotiating) making compromises, discussing, educating, convincing, lobbying, manipulating, threatening, and coercion," and in connection to the list from 1993, Strauss is referring to his 1978 book. Persuading, educating, manipulating, appealing to the rules or to the authority and coercion all refer to social relations, where one party is trying to unilaterally affect another party. Hence, there is no negotiation and coming to a mutual agreement. When Strauss comes from 1978 book to his book in 1993, *compromising* has somehow moved to other strategies besides negotiation. *Discussing* is also an odd choice to be on the side of non-negotiating. Strauss is himself, besides obscure, also inconsistent.

## Power and status

Five basic modes of interaction are demarcated by Nisbet. They are "exchange, cooperation, conformity, coercion, and conflict" (1970, pp. 63–79). Negotiations aim at movement from conflict (and coercion) towards exchange, cooperation and conformity. Negotiations are dynamic, and they can be said to have a "Schützian" *projection* of non-conflict in the future temporality (see Barber, 2022).

The basic two *means* and *motives* holding up social structures and moving social processes are power and status (c.f. Kemper and Collins, p. 1990). They are means, because power and status *enable*, and they are motives, because power and status are *wanted*. Both power and status can be included in the analysis of negotiations. However, they should be included so that we can take into account both the dynamical change inside power and status relations and in the relative importance between power and status.

Pluralist organisation theory says that conflicts are solved with *power* (Burrell and Morgan, 2000, pp. 203–204). In pluralism, power is of the *power over* type – like Weber (1978, p. 53) defines: "[T]he probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance . . .." The perspective of negotiated order seems to, almost by definition, presume that there is not much use of power in negotiations. Therefore, the pluralist power theory seems at odds with negotiated order theory. There are two ways out of this: either power needs to be defined more broadly or the force used in negotiations is not power.

When we look at the different synonyms for negotiating above, it is evident that they can contain power behaviour also in the Weberian sense. Exchange can be conceptualised as power

based – based on resource dependencies (Molm, 2007). Concessions in compromising may be founded on exchange and therefore brought on by power. Negotiations are therefore *not* devoid of power over, even if the related literature seems to implicitly avoid the subject of power.

The Weberian power conception is often good for studying the actors' relationships episodically and situationally, but organisational action also consists of patterned, repeated interaction and relatively stable shared meanings and assumptions. Moreover, the negotiated order perspective belongs to symbolic interactionist theorising, which is, literally, about interaction. Instead of looking at the single agents, we may look at the interacting group of people and study its social dynamics. It is possible to see power as a force that gives this interacting group as a whole its strength to "maximize" the performance of organisational tasks. A *power with* viewpoint (see Partzsch and Fuchs, 2012) is relevant and useful and makes the analysis of organisational action more intuitive. Negotiations may opt for "power with," wherein "[p]ower is neither attributed solely to A nor to B, but both". In this case, the organisation as a unit may produce synergic results and perform more effectively. Instead of an antithesis for dialogue, power may be seen as a positive fuel for negotiations. The negotiations in an organisation over the social rights and duties of the actors are conducted (among other goals, which may be individuals' goals) for the "good" of the social organisation as a whole. The results can vary from keeping up the good social interaction all the way to producing material output in cooperation.

What about the other, non-power-related forces that move interaction? It is not just the concept of power that is somewhat missing from the analysis of negotiations. The concept of status should also be included in the perspective. Status in the social psychological sense means honour and prestige that is given to a person or a social unit voluntarily (see, e.g. Thye and Witkowski, 2005; Kemper and Collins, 1990). Power and status are theoretically distinct phenomena, but it is evident that the dynamics of power and status get intertwined empirically.

The reason why the concept of status is not explicitly featured in the negotiated order analyses, and demarcated from power, may be that status relations are taken for granted in interactions analysis. Hospital environments are an archetypical empirical analysis target in negotiated order studies, and hospitals are very hierarchic organisations. Negotiated order studies often seem precisely targeted at studying just the dynamic changes in status (and power), yet power and status are downplayed as theoretical constructs.

Rights and duties reside in roles ("who"), and process rules reside in technical norms and practices ("how"). Both the normative and the technical may be negotiated – they are connected by the division of labour (to perform a task, i.e. the "what"). Division of labour connects individuals to roles: structural power and status positions. When the division of labour is negotiated, rights and duties in roles are negotiated in relation to the task and its performance, which means that powers and statuses are given meanings both old and new.

## Disassembling negotiations

Let us try to disassemble the negotiated order idea to understand it by its constituent parts. An organisation has tasks to be performed and goals to be realised. The goals may be material, or the goal may be the keeping up of the social relationship between the actors (like in a recreational club) or any combination of these kinds of goals. The tasks need to be performed efficiently and both morally and technically correctly. The performance of tasks requires a division of labour and a (coordinated) process.

In an organisation, the rules for the division of labour, and the process, may be more or less formal. They may cover most of the action and interaction situations to help the actors orient themselves with reasonable effort and satisfactory results.

Nevertheless, often, empirically, the formal rules for process and the division of labour may be regarded as deficient or lacking, at least on some respects. The participants in the

interaction do not then assess them rational and/or emotionally and normatively right. There would seem to be need for flexibility and situational adjustment.

The organisational process is bound by tasks and the goals, the technical rules that guide the phases of the process and the resources that the organisation has. Let us take the technical side of the process as given and concentrate on the division of labour "inside", i.e. constrained by this process. The division of rights and duties in the organisational endeavour is based on the actors' power resources, such as authority position, available time and skills and abilities, and they are also based on the actors' status in the hierarchy of prestige and respect they have in the social group. A random example of the differentiated character of power and status can be found from literature. In the beginning of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot,* Prince Myshkin (high status) enters the Saint Petersburg society with relative ease, even if he is financially broke (low power) (Dostojevski, 1929).

How are rights and duties settled and re-settled so that (1) everyone may retain their dignity (statuses) and (2) tasks are being performed efficiently (powers)? Negotiations are needed to get things sorted and done.

Basically, negotiated order is about the rules of the process and the mutually acceptable division or rights and duties in the performance of this process. This division is constrained by the nature of the task (its flow, quality and quantity), the *realistic* power resources that the actors have and their *actual* status properties. Both the formal order and the negotiated order have normative weight, and they may be in accordance on some parts, and inconsistent on others.

Any organisational action is strongly based on the structural context and negotiation context. It would be hard to study for example social relations in municipal administration without taking into account the administrative–political environment and the centrality of policy-making and decision-making processes. Who gets to interact with whom and what their power and status in each interaction situation is depend on the task area and the roles and positions of the interactants. The actual decisions and the way the decisions are processed empirically directly give information about the relations between the decision-makers: both politicians and administrators in a dual decision-making environment, such as the public government.

## A working definition
No clear definition for negotiating the order seems to exist. I do not claim here that I can provide a very good one, either. I am, nevertheless, going to formulate a working definition for negotiated order in the organisational context. It is a rather complicated definition and goes as follows:

> Negotiated order is a (1) context-bound (2) dynamic set of (3) semi-tacit (4) social rules that differ from, or add to the formal social rules, and govern or adjust (5) the flow of the organisational process, and the (6) rights and duties of the actors in (7) different organisational positions, and which are (8) to be observed on an everyday basis in conducting the (9) social relationship and common tasks, and which have the intention or function to take the (10) real resources of and often also the (11) self-esteem of the actors into account to make the (12) conduct of a common and individual tasks and the attainment of common and individual goals (13) more flexible and comfortable and/or (14) more efficient, or even (15) possible at all.

A working negotiated order in an organisation may frame acting together from "plain" coordination to full-blown cooperation with common goals. Coordination, in this connection, means the ordering of action in space and time with the function or conscious intention for interlocking co-action (see Ullmann-Margalit, 1977, p. 83). This co-ordination may work more or less well.

Full-blown cooperation with common goals, again, means something like a complementarity of roles and supportiveness of identities with co-ordinated effort to attain joint goals (see esp.

Tuomela, 2000, pp. 1–25; also, Klemelä, n.d.). In a negotiated order, the state of coordination or the state of full-blown cooperation with common goals are not fixed but are subject to potential renegotiation at all times. Negotiated order is the "structure and process for the day" – both are on the move. Otherwise, we would face a stagnated social and material world.

It seems as if it is impossible to explain negotiated order in an uncomplicated manner, when *at least some degree of precision* is aimed at. Let us now take a more detailed look at the definition of negotiated order above. The numbering used below corresponds to the numbering in the working definition already given, but the order of the items has been somewhat altered for the ease of presentation. Negotiated order is (1) valid in a specific context. The context needs to be included in the analysis in order to understand what is expected from the actors and what they have to offer in this specific context. The negotiated order is (2) temporal and may change in the course of time dynamically, from one power and status constellation and process order to another and back. It consists of (3) social rules that are not normally put into words but which the participants in the negotiated order may be able to verbalise if asked. The negotiated order rules may (4) fill in holes in the formal rule system or even (usually in moderation) depart from them. Negotiated order (5) regulates the organisational process and tells (6) which rights and duties "in reality," (8) in everyday (9) social and task situations apply for actors in (7) different and differentiated organisational positions. The intention or function of the negotiated order rules is to (10) take into account the real and realistic resources (power) and (11) group and social status and the related self-esteem of the actors to make it possible for them to (12) perform their common tasks and individual tasks and attain their common goals and individual goals (13) more flexibly and in a more comfortable manner and/or (14) more efficiently or (15) at all.

The rules are "to be observed" so the negotiated order is not coerced. The actors can, in principle, verbalise the rules, and thus they are not being manipulated and unconscious of their position.

The concept of the negotiated order is usually used in a descriptive way. The notions of power and status and the criterion for the order to serve the efficiency and the dignity of the interaction give the definition some normative content. The prevailing negotiated order in a specific context may be to some extent predicted if we know the relative resources and statuses of the actors and if we have an idea of optimal results. The results may be both task results and the quality of the interaction itself.

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### Notes

1. Also "working toward collective or individualistic ends" (Strauss, 1978, p. x).

2. Italics removed.

3. This understanding correlates to the following definition in the Oxford English Dictionary: "A method according to which things [!] acts or events take place; the fixed arrangement found in the existing state of things; a natural, moral, spiritual, or social system in which things proceed according to definite, established, or constituted laws... " The *negotiated* order, of course, is anything else than "definite, established, or constituted".

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